

Presbyterian officials said they closed a thriving Alaska Native church in Juneau in 1963 to help end segregation. The closure just happened to reduce competition and boost membership in a nearby White church.

BY JOAQLIN ESTUS (TLINGIT)

SEGREGATION OF FAITH



PHOTO BY SKIP GRAY





ABOVE: Rev. Walter Soboleff became minister of the newly built Memorial Presbyterian Church in 1940. PHOTO BY PAUL SINCIC, COURTESY OF JANET SOBOLEFF BURKE

LEFT: After its closure in 1962, the Memorial Presbyterian Church building was put to other uses before being demolished in 1976.

THE REV. WALTER SOBOLEFF, a widely honored and respected Tlingit Elder, died in 2011 at the age of 102. From his birth and childhood in the Southeast Alaska village of Killisnoo, Walter had gone on to become the first Tlingit ordained Presbyterian minister. He founded the University of Alaska Fairbanks Native Studies program in 1972 and served on the state board of education. University and cultural buildings were named after him, and, he had been awarded a doctorate in Divinity as well as an honorary doctorate in Humanities.

Few knew he had built a church from nearly nothing in the 1940s only to have it shut down against his wishes in 1963. Friends and loved ones say it deeply wounded him. But he rarely discussed, and never criticized, the closure and bulldozing of his church.

The closure of Walter's church stems from Juneau's segregated past. Originally two Presbyterian churches were founded in Juneau, one for Tlingit Indians in 1887 and one for Whites in 1891.

In 1940, Walter arrived in Juneau to become pastor of the Native church, now renamed Memorial Presbyterian Church. He was 3, and a recent graduate of Dubuque Theological Seminary. Walter's son Sasha, who is Tlingit and Haida, said his father's start at Memorial was not promising.

"Dad told me that his first service had three people. Two of them were him and Mom," he said. The third was an elderly Native woman who knew Walter.

But Walter knew how to grow a church. Over the years, he sent out hundreds of hand-written notes and letters. Walter broadcast the news in Tlingit on the radio, and later his sermons.

Maxine Richert, Athabaskan and Tlingit, said, "I noticed where he would advertise [in the newspaper], 'come to the men's prayer lunch, hot dogs will be served.'

"And he had fireside chats for the youth in the winter. We would roast hot dogs and just teenagers would sit around with Walter," said Maxine. He would pray, then ask how they were doing. She remembers one time he invited high school cheerleaders to show girls in the youth group how to put on makeup.

Walter asked, and church members agreed to welcome non-Natives into the formerly all-Alaska Native church.

In 1953, Carl Marvin Jr. moved from the Tlingit village of Hoonah to Juneau. Local businesses in Juneau had only recently stopped posting signs, "We Cater to White Trade Only," and "No Dogs or Indians Allowed."



4th of July at Juneau ball park near Memorial Presbyterian Church, with Gold Creek in the foreground and Douglas bridge in the right background. No date.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALASKA STATE LIBRARY HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS ASL-JUNEAU-BASEBALL-3

“I’m obviously a full-blooded Tlingit and then all of a sudden got around a lot of White people,” said Carl. He said having a Tlingit man at the head of Juneau’s first racially mixed congregation helped him get comfortable in his new social setting.

Walter also opened the church to house visitors from villages who came to Juneau for a regional basketball tournament.

“I remember cooking for a number of teams. It was nothing to have five different teams – who came to town on five different seine [fishing] boats – living at Memorial Church,” recalls Walter’s son Sasha.

Walter’s personality and message drew people as well. He’s been described as humble and caring. His sermons often focused on mercy and God’s love.

By the 1950s, Memorial Presbyterian Church was a community hub. It hosted activities and services nearly every day. It was a meeting place for 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts. The church seated maybe 100 people and was packed during holiday services.

Judy Franklet (Tlingit) said generations of her family went to the Native church.

“My great grandmother and grandfather... were Elders of the church. [It] was an extension of our family, our extended family,” said Judy.

As she was growing up in the 1940s and ‘50s, her family went to Memorial Presbyterian two or three times a week for services or activities such as potlucks and coffee after Sunday services.

Just as the church had been part of her Ancestors’ extended family, for her, “It was a second home,” said Judy. Her parents and grandmother spoke Tlingit at home, and Walter gave part of his sermons in Tlingit.

“That was very special to us... you love to hear your own language,” said Judy.

“STATE OF SHOCK”

The White church of 1891 had become Northern Light Presbyterian Church. In 1958 it started making plans to move from almost a mile away to within a few blocks of Memorial Presbyterian.

Retired Northern Light pastor the Rev. Phil Campbell said church officials okayed the move over the objections of Memorial church Elders. The Presbytery told the two churches to work toward unification, a directive both sides evidently ignored. The same board that funded Memorial and said the money was drying up, gave a construction loan to Northern Light for the new building.

Attorney, author and historian Kathy

Kolkhort Ruddy said church records show discussions about shrinking donations were quickly followed by talks about the two churches situated just blocks apart.

The town couldn't support both. The church had to adjust, said Kathy. "But they made the terrible decision to close the special church."

Memorial celebrated its 75th anniversary in 1962. In December of that year, Walter told the congregation that the Board of National Missions, which owned the church, was closing it down. He had no explanation.

Judy was 23 at the time. "I just remember I was in a state of shock," she said.

In years past the church had put its best foot forward and welcomed visiting church officials. But none came that day to explain why this successful church was folding.

"In the church, he was left all alone to do that horrible announcement," said Judy. "There was nobody from back east who made those decisions to come up here to explain the reason."

Church officials said the church was being closed due to a new United Presbyterian Church in the USA (PC USA) policy to end segregated churches.

"That was just to save face," said Kathy. "I mean they might say that, but it's totally not the truth. It doesn't even make sense. How does closing a Native church help end segregation?"

In 1962 protests, sit-ins and freedom rides to register Black voters were drawing attention to segregation. Walter's daughter Janet Burke, Tlingit and Haida, remembers telling her father, "I would have thrown myself across the threshold of the church and stayed there."

But he "laid down the law" to his kids, said Kathy. "We are not going to protest."

Instead, Memorial Presbyterian members were urged to switch to Northern Light.

Walter, ever the model of forgiveness, did so.



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Over the years, the Memorial Presbyterian Choir traveled to Kake, Angoon, Hoonah, Haines, Klukwan and Skagway. Shown here are some of the choir members on Christmas Eve 1962 after caroling and having treats at Tom and Connie Paddock's Juneau home.

UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER,
COURTESY OF MAXINE PADDOCK
RICHERT



ABOVE LEFT: Rev. Walter Soboleff served seven terms as Grand President of the Alaska Native Brotherhood; he is shown here wearing an ANB cap and koo-geeeina, or banner. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER, N.D. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Sasha Soboleff, Walter's son, is shown here with the communion table cross from Memorial Presbyterian Church.

For the next eight years after Memorial Presbyterian Church closed, Soboleff traveled on the *Princeton Hall* (shown here) and other mission boats as an itinerant minister for several villages with no resident pastor
PHOTO COURTESY OF SEALASKA HERITAGE INSTITUTE, WILLIAM L. PAUL, SR., ARCHIVES, BILL RUDDY COLLECTION, N.D.

LEFT: Rev. Walter Soboleff on the steps of Memorial Presbyterian Church in Juneau, No date. Photo courtesy of Alaska State Library Historical Collection
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Judy said she couldn't bring herself to go there. "I know not many people did move to that church. And, we, our family was one of them [that didn't]."

Church records show less than half of the Memorial congregation transferred to Northern Light.

Judy said her life no longer revolved around her church. "I tried later to go to churches, but it just wasn't the same." She didn't leave her faith entirely, though. She maintained ties to Walter.

"He married my husband and I, and I made sure he baptized our children. I would call him. I would write him. I said, 'I want my children baptized by you' ...those were the only services I went to," said Judy.

PAIN LINGERS

Now, almost 60 years later, the pain lingers. She remembers talking about the end of the Native church with the Rev. Phil Campbell before he retired in 2018.

"Tears came to my eyes just talking about it," said Judy. "The decision to close the Alaska Native church shows the majority population felt Alaska Natives and American Indians didn't really matter. They weren't important as part of the society," said Judy.

The media was told the two churches were uniting. In actuality, a White church pushed to get a Native church closed to take its members.

It could have been different. A few years later, a local Methodist church did unite with Northern Light. The two parties had spent a year negotiating the terms, which included alternating Presbyterian and Methodist ministers over the years.

Northern Light was looking for a new pastor the same year Memorial was being closed. But Walter wasn't offered the position.

Walter had been offered a job as an itinerant minister before Memorial's closure became public, which made it look like the church closed because he left. In his mid-50s, he spent weeks traveling by boat to hold services in villages, logging camps, and Coast Guard stations in Southeast Alaska.

In the Northern Light United Church March 2018 newsletter, Phil said the way the policy to end segregation was carried out was an expression of the "dominant

culture's belief in the superiority of White ways." White people made the decisions about integration just as they had with segregation, he said.

The effort was "...fueled by the obliviousness to White privilege that continues to infect race relations." That attitude stymies the possibility of "establishing a genuinely multi-racial community of love, justice, compassion, and respect," said Phil.

In 1991, Northern Light minister Lew Rooker apologized to Alaska Natives and disavowed teachings that Natives had to abandon their cultures to become Christian.

In 2016, the PC USA voted to apologize to Native Americans for the church's role in forced assimilation and for boarding school abuses. The head of the Yukon Presbytery carried the message to the largest annual gathering of Alaska Natives, the Alaska Federation of Natives convention, which in 2016 was held in Fairbanks.

"We tried to make you be like us and, in so doing, we helped to diminish the sacred vision that made you who you are," said the Rev. Curt Karns. "Thus we demonstrated that we did not fully understand the gospel we were trying to preach."

Today, Alaska Natives hold leadership roles in Northern Light United Church and have formed a Native Ministries Committee. The church sponsors the Tlingit Gospel Singers. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Northern Light had an Alaska Native associate minister.

By promoting healing and inclusion, the committee seeks to right the wrong done to the Memorial Presbyterian Church more than a half century ago.

Judy, however, said no one can fully undo the harm done to the Juneau Native community. "Many families were weakened because they lost that connection with the church." To this day, she said, "People are hurting." ◀

This article relies in part on research by the Rev. Phil Campbell. The Native Ministries Committee of Northern Light United Church sponsored interviews done by the author. Thank you to Peter Metcalfe and Phil for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this story. Joaqlin Estus, Tlingit, is a long-time Alaska journalist.